

Our 7 Rivers

2019 EDITION / Our7Rivers.com

A collaboration of the 7 Rivers Alliance and the River Valley Media Group



OUR 7 RIVERS: WHY WE LOVE IT HERE

▶ **RAPID GROWTH LEADS TO
\$300 MILLION EXPANSION
OF KWIK TRIP SUPPORT CENTER**

▶ **WORKFORCE INNOVATION
FOR A STRONG ECONOMY**

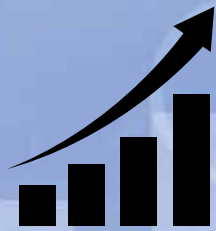
▶ **WORK • SHOP • LOVE LIFE**

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7 Rivers Alliance: Chris Hardie, CEO

River Valley Media Group: Josh Trust, president and publisher

Publication designer: Kim Fiedler

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March 25, 2019

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MESSAGE FROM THE CEO



The world of economic development is quite complex, but the biggest challenge facing the 7 Rivers

Region is a lack of workers.

That challenge was clearly identified in 2017 when we launched the Workforce Innovation for a Strong Economy (WISE) Plan and remains our top priority.

How do we deal with the projection that our region will have a net shortage of more than 15,500 workers to fill the expected new jobs during the next 10 years? We continued working in 2018 on a number of strategies focused on talent preparation, talent recruitment and talent retention.

Among the specific strategies are providing additional skills and training to the unemployed or underemployed, marketing the region as a great place to live and work, and working to make the region more ethnically diverse.

The 7 Rivers Alliance held several summits last year that focused on how we can help our businesses find workers. In May we held a workforce summit that featured roundtable discussions on how to hire the

disabled, how to hire veterans and how to hire ex-offenders.

Providing more internships and apprenticeships is a key part of developing workers, so in September we held a summit focusing on those two important topics. We also partnered with the Monroe County Workforce Alliance in November to hold a summit on employee recruitment and retention.

Work also continues on the three barriers the WISE Plan identifies as critical workforce impediments across our region: housing, transportation and child care. We going to hit these topics head on with three summits in 2019.

None of these efforts are done alone. Our mission of providing leadership to regional economic growth through collaboration remains a top priority. It's a pleasure working with our regional business, economic development and government leaders.

My thanks to the continued support we have from all of these people, as well as our board members, investors and members. Working together we will continue to improve the vitality of our region.

Sincerely,
Chris Hardie
CEO, 7 Rivers Alliance

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MISSION

The 7 Rivers Alliance is a tri-state leadership council dedicated to regional economic growth by fostering collaboration in Southwest Wisconsin, Southeast Minnesota and Northeast Iowa. The 7 Rivers Alliance brings together public and private resources to forge entrepreneurial growth and serves as a clearinghouse of vital information to enhance the quality of life in the region.

2018-2021 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

REMOVE BARRIERS TO GROWTH – coordinate open and ongoing communication with business leaders to aid in business growth and expansion.

SUPPORT TALENT PIPELINE DEVELOPMENT – strengthen business-higher education partnerships to sustain a skilled workforce talent pool.

THRIVE IN A UNIFIED REGION – promote the assets and resources of the Upper Mississippi River region.

GROW KEY INDUSTRY CLUSTERS – convene industries and enhance B2B collaboration.

FOCUS ON BUSINESS – attract and retain businesses locally and globally.

Our principles of collaboration

EQUITY – We support economic opportunity and high quality of life for people of all backgrounds and skill levels.

COLLABORATION – Our economies and assets transcend physical borders and boundaries. Our ability to compete globally is dependent upon our ability to collaborate locally as a region.

COOPERATION – We advocate for cooperative intergovernmental strategies that maintain regional business development initiatives and improve the overall efficiency of municipal services throughout the 7 rivers region.

STEWARDSHIP – Our preservation of physical assets, infrastructure and natural resources is critical as they are inextricably linked to quality of life. Economic prosperity means a high quality of life, and quality of life fosters economic prosperity.

CELEBRATION – We identify, celebrate and market the unique assets of all counties and communities within the region. We recognize that the promotion of our region is a competitive advantage for attracting business and new resources into the region.

OUR 7 RIVERS:

Why we love it here



Welcome to the 7 Rivers Region – the gem of the Upper Midwest.

It is a region so beautiful, the glaciers left it alone, leaving behind spectacular bluffs that keep watch over the Mississippi River Valley.

This 14-county region of western Wisconsin, southeast Minnesota and northeast Iowa is more than scenic.

It offers a quality of life that combines high-quality education from kindergarten through college; world-class medical care; environmental wonders and abundant wildlife

and outdoor recreation; an entrepreneurial spirit and regional collaboration.

It's the type of place where high schools work together with colleges and businesses to develop high-tech, career-track training.

We celebrate our Rising Stars Under 40 – the young professionals who are making a difference in their communities. We celebrate our high school seniors who have overcome obstacles or provided exemplary services to community.

In other words, we celebrate people in the 7 Rivers Region, not just our beautiful landscape. Terrific schools and higher education are the

bedrock of our region.

In addition to high-scoring K-12 education, the 7 Rivers Region is blessed with public and private universities and technical colleges – all preparing top students for tomorrow's workforce.

INDUSTRY IS THRIVING

We make fasteners and furniture.

We have clusters of industry that specialize in composites and food processing.

We grow crops and raise chickens and dairy cattle.

Farm-to-table is embraced by area restaurants, and organic farming is a huge economic drivers.

The 7 Rivers Region boasts a vibrant arts scene.

In Winona, you'll find artwork from some of the world's masters at the Minnesota Marine Art Museum; great performances at the Great River Shakespeare Festival; and beautiful music at the Minnesota Beethoven Festival, which has featured fabulous talent from Yo-Yo Ma and Branford Marsalis to the Minnesota Orchestra.

The world-acclaimed Nordic Choir at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, provides stunning sounds.

In La Crosse, enjoy all sorts of music performed in Riverside Park along the Mississippi.

You'll find theater performances at the Weber Center for the Performing Arts, The Pump House or at Viterbo University or the university of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

In fact, you'll hear grand performances throughout the region, from the Heider Center in West Salem and Old Main in Galesville and the La Crosse Symphony Orchestra.

And, you'll love the Prairie Dog Blues Festival in Prairie du Chien.

That's just a sampling of the cultural events in towns small and large.

If you love the outdoors, the 7 Rivers Region is blessed with fabulous opportunities.

From boating to biking and birding to hiking, you'll find plenty to enjoy.

There are gorgeous state parks and national wildlife refuges along the Mississippi River.

Our pristine trout streams bring tourists from throughout the United States.

The Mississippi hosts national fishing tournaments.

Area lakes and rivers are terrific for kayaking, canoeing and boating, as well as fishing.

You'll find plenty of wildlife – and our deer hunting is a huge tourist draw.

The region is a key leg of the Mississippi

Flyway. You can see more than 325 bird species make the round-trip each year, from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico.

An annual feature is the visit of flocks of snowy-white pelicans and tundra swans.

The bald eagle soars along the Mississippi and the feeds off the fish in area rivers

Biking and hiking in the bluffs is great sport.

If you prefer motorized outdoor fun, the snowmobile and ATV trails of Jackson County are a particular treat.

If you want to stay in the car or ride your motorcycle, there are scenic vistas.

Take a spectacular drive along the Great River Road – much of it along America's Main Street, the Mississippi River.

Or, marvel at the historic Mindoro Cut.

HUNGRY?

The 7 Rivers Region is the Apple Capital of the Upper Midwest, and the fall harvest brings great apples and fun festivals to celebrate autumn.

During the summer, check out a pizza farm – wood-fired pizza served under a beautiful sky at one of several rural retreats.

And, if you enjoy a beverage, you'll find plenty of wineries and craft breweries throughout the 7 Rivers.

Tourism is a strong part of the economy. The La Crosse Center is the largest civic center in the region, but there are a number of smaller venues that host business and civic groups.

There's plenty to do and see – countless opportunities for enjoying our history, arts, recreation and culture.

Coulee is a French word for a valley or ravine and it's what we call the unique region that covers nearly 15,000 square miles of southwestern Wisconsin, southeast Minnesota and northeast Iowa.

It's also a land sometimes called the Driftless Area, a region that was not scoured by the glaciers during the last Ice Age. And so

BIKING RESOURCES

www.bicyclelacrosse.com

www.ridebctc.com

www.driftlessbicycle.org

www.bike-trails.net



TOURISM RESOURCES

www.visitcaledonia.com

www.lacrescentmn.com

www.explorelacrosse.com

www.bicyclelacrosse.com

www.discoveralaska.com

www.tomahwisconsin.com

www.bikesparta.org

www.blackrivercountry.net

www.driftlesswisconsin.com

www.bluffcountry.com

www.ruralexperiences.com

12,000 years ago the land-leveling mountains of ice moved around our region, leaving us with the rugged hills and bluffs, the remnants of a vast inland sea from hundreds of millions of years ago.

It's a region blessed with verdant valleys and remote points. And it is all as tranquil and reposeful as dreamland, and has nothing this-worldly about it – nothing to hang a fret or a worry upon.

The region's largest city – and Wisconsin's largest on the Mississippi – is La Crosse, which was supposedly named by French explorers who saw Native Americans playing a game with a leather ball and a curved stick that looked similar to the la crozier stick carried by French bishops. The city was permanently settled beginning in 1841.

The region's forests gave birth to the first major industry – logging and sawmills. There were more than two dozen sawmills that employed more than 4,000 people, sending billions of square feet of lumber downstream that were used to help build a nation.

The hills and valleys of the region drew European settlers who found land similar to home. Agriculture became an important part of the region, along with the smaller communities that grew. The region is a cultural melting pot, with many nationalities and religions represented.

Today the region welcomes more than 1 million visitors a year. Whether you're here on business or pleasure, there are many things to do, many things to see and many places to eat, drink or be entertained.

BLUFF TO BLUFF

To capture a spectacular view of the river valley, follow Main Street to Grandad Bluff, the highest point east of La Crosse. The bluff is 1,183 feet above sea level and 590 feet above the city. From a newly renovated observation deck

you will witness the panoramic view of three states.

From the west side of the bluffs drive along La Crescent's Apple Blossom Scenic Drive, where there are impressive views of the prairie and Lake Onalaska. You can also see Lock and Dam No. 7, part of the Mississippi River's lock and dam system.

Take Hwy. 16 – a National Scenic Byway – south of La Crescent to Hokah and pick up Hwy. 44 for a visit to Caledonia, named the Wild Turkey Capital of Minnesota and center of the Quilting the Countryside project, where 60 beautifully painted wooden quilts grace rural barns throughout the county.

RIVER CRUISES

Enjoy and explore the mighty Mississippi River.

From the shore you can walk in Riverside Park in downtown La Crosse or go across the bridge to Pettibone Park. There are also daily sightseeing cruises.

CRANBERRY COUNTRY

Western Wisconsin is home to production of one of North America's native fruits – the cranberry.

The berries are grown in beds where there is an adequate supply of water and sand. The vines blossom in late June or early July and are harvested in the fall when the beds are loaded and the berries float to the surface of the water.

Head to the Wisconsin Cranberry Discovery Center in Warrens to learn about the heritage of the cranberry industry, take a guided tour or take a selfguided tour.

Warrens is called the Cranberry Capital of Wisconsin. Within a 15-mile radius there are more than 2,500 acres of cranberries that produce an average of 40,000,000 pounds of cranberries annually.

BIKING CENTRAL

Whether you enjoy riding trails or roads, the Coulee Region boasts some of the best bicycling in the country. There are more than 160 miles of flat limestone trails that are part of the state trail system. The city of Sparta, the Bicycling Capital of America, is in midst of the trail system and is where the first rail bed was converted to a trail. There are also excellent road riding opportunities on both sides of the river, from flat highways to roads that snake through the coulees and over the ridges. The opportunities are numerous.

DINING AND NIGHT LIFE

Dining and night life exploration in the Coulee Region is limited only by your time. There are award-winning restaurants in historic buildings to traditional supper clubs to ethnic eateries. There's pizza and pub food and many taverns to enjoy beer, wine and other drinks.





CCLS is a provider of services/supports for individuals with developmental disabilities, mental illness, physical disabilities, or functional limitations of advanced aging.

We provide clients with person-centered, individualized community supports.

Working within CCLS means more than just putting in your time and getting a paycheck. It is about supporting people with disabilities as you help them learn to become more independent in their community.

CONTACT US & APPLY TODAY!

Downtown La Crosse thrives as regional hub

Visitors to downtown La Crosse can sense the vibe.

It is a thriving center of business and commerce, tourism and retail, dining and entertainment, residential and culture.

Downtown La Crosse's doubling of hotel rooms, surge in urban-core residents and an expected boom in conventions with the La Crosse Center upgrade and expansion mean a lot more people in the historic city center.

Much of the boost got its start with the Weber family.

From the first Riverside Center building built as Logistics Health Inc.'s corporate center to the new Belle Square project, the Don and Roxanne Weber family has driven employment and population growth in downtown La Crosse.

LHI founder Don Weber said his family so far has made more than \$220 million in investments in downtown La Crosse.

And that doesn't include the approximately 600-space municipal parking ramp that The

Weber Group has built at Third and Vine streets at an estimated cost of more than \$17.4 million, which includes first-floor retail space along Third Street.

And there's a new distillery that makes spirits as bourbons, other whiskeys, gins and vodkas, Nick Weber said. "We're working with regional farmers using organic heirloom grains" to make those products, he said.

Belle Square, a \$68 million development the Webers built on a former county parking lot, is a mix of office, retail and apartment space. An Associated Bank branch, Cowgill Dental office and Mayo Clinic Health System-Franciscan Healthcare clinic already have opened on the first floor. A Weber-owned wellness center also is on that floor, for people who work or live in Belle Square.

Gundersen Health System has about 90 employees in its human resources, legal and related departments in Belle Square office space, and LHI also occupies some of the office space. And, Gundersen has purchased the former Wettstein building for conversion into a dental practice.

The architecture and design firm Gensler

moved its La Crosse office to the second floor of Belle Square, too.

LHI began as an outgrowth of National Health Screenings Inc., which began in 1987 in La Crosse. It has been known as Logistics Health since 1999 and provides a variety of occupational health and medical, dental and behavioral programs to commercial and government clients.

The Weber family built its first Riverside Center building as LHI's corporate center. It and the Weber-owned Waterfront Restaurant and Tavern on part of the building's first floor opened in 2006.

That was followed by two more Riverside Center office buildings.

OptumHealth, part of health care giant UnitedHealth Group of Minnetonka, Minn., bought LHI in 2011 and bought the three Riverside Center buildings in 2014.

Today, Don Weber said, the Riverside Center campus houses more than 2,050 workers. They are employed by LHI, SAP, Kaplan Professional and Weber businesses such as the Waterfront Restaurant, Riverside Corporate Wellness LLC and River Rocks Coffee.



LHI has nearly 2,000 employees in downtown La Crosse.

The Webers also have opened two new hotels downtown in the past three years. The Charmant Hotel, a 67-room boutique hotel, opened in September 2015 in the former Joseph B. Funke Candy Co. factory at 101 State St. And the Webers opened their 107-room Home2 Suites by Hilton La Crosse hotel at 210 Jay St. in July 2016.

The two hotels together have about 150 employees.

The Weber family also was very involved in the creation of the downtown Weber Center for the Performing Arts theater, which opened in 2013 and is used for La Crosse Community Theatre and Viterbo University productions. The family donated the land and some of the money in the fundraising campaign for its construction.

"I appreciate how much they've done for the downtown," Robin Moses, executive director of Downtown Mainstreet Inc., said of the Weber family. The Webers have "absolutely" been a major factor in downtown residential and job growth, she said.

"We as a community have a lot to appreciate

them for," Moses said. "For the confidence they have in the community and the investments they have made. Their investments downtown have created confidence that has spurred other people to improve their properties and make their own investments."

"That's what excites me," Don Weber said of the new jobs that have resulted from LHI's growth and his family's investments downtown.

"These are people starting their careers here, moving here from other places," Weber said. The projects also have resulted in major increases in tax base, he said.

GOOD MUSIC, GOOD VIBE

A big part of the attraction of the city's downtown comes from a rich smorgasbord of entertainment offerings.

"Our streets don't roll up at 9 o'clock," Moses said. "I think having a vibrant nightlife is something real important for downtown. We have that so strong in downtown La Crosse."

La Crosse's downtown has long been a hotbed for musical entertainment. And, with the addition of more than 450 hotel rooms and a big increase in downtown residents in the past few

years, there's certainly a bigger audience.

The Charmant Hotel hosts intimate acoustic music shows on Friday nights in the lobby, along with occasional rooftop terrace concerts. The Court Above Main, an elegant old-school ballroom, also is becoming known for hosting concerts, as is the Grand Hotel Ballroom above The Pearl, which — like The Charmant and The Court Above Main — was a venue for the Mid West Music Fest.

This year has seen a major uptick in bookings at the Cavalier Theater, including everything from experimental ambient music, hip-hop and jam bands to outlaw country, metal and Americana, and The Root Note continues to offer an eclectic mix of musical acts as well.

Other venerable downtown music venues include the Popcorn Tavern, The Warehouse and The Pump House Regional Arts Center, with a long list of restaurants and bars offering musical entertainment for weekend patrons, including the Bodega, the Helm Bar, Piggy's Restaurant and Blues Lounge, 4 Sisters (in two locations), Starlite Lounge, Stein Haus, John's Bar, Earl's Grocery and Saloon, Del's Bar and more.

The Riverside Park bandstand offers free





*“If you live downtown,
there’s really no reason
to get in your car and go
anyplace else.
Everything you need
is downtown.”*

— Phil Addis

musical entertainment all summer long, between Moon Tunes, the La Crosse Concert Band and the La Crosse Jazz Orchestra.

And, there are big plans to enhance the music venue.

And, of course, there’s the La Crosse Center, which plays host to the biggest entertainment events — musical and otherwise — that the La Crosse area has to offer, and plans are being developed for a \$42 million expansion and renovation will include an upgrade.

“I don’t foresee it changing much what we’ve done in the past,” said Art Fahey, the center’s director, adding that it’s possible the revamped arena might give some buzz to the center that will help attract stops from more concert tours.

“The La Crosse Center is its own economic driver,” La Crosse Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Vicki Markussen said. “Every dollar brought in through an event at the La Crosse Center has a ripple effect to area hotels, restaurants, caterers, beverage suppliers and more. When the Center is vibrant with activity, the entire downtown and beyond feels it. That’s a tremendous asset for any community to have.”

La Crosse has now risen to the top 10 tourist destinations in Wisconsin — a key factor in economic growth for our region.

As rich as the downtown music scene is, Moses noted that it has a lot more than tunes to offer. For example, there’s live theater at the Weber Center for the Performing Arts, a gem of a venue overlooking the Mississippi River. And the Rivoli

Theater offers two screens on which to watch second-run movies while enjoying beer, wine and cocktails and a menu that includes pizza and sandwiches as well as the usual popcorn and Junior Mints.

And the downtown area offers entertainment options beyond music and theater, including escape rooms. History tourism also is a big and growing attraction, Moses noted, especially considering that 96 of 110 buildings in a seven-block area in downtown La Crosse are on the National Register of Historic Places.

“I think we have potential for more historical tourism entertainment,” Moses said.

Downtown La Crosse at night used to be known as a place for college students to hit the bars, but that’s changed and will change further, with a concerted effort being made to continue developing a nightlife that offers attractions for all ages, a scene compatible with a growing population of downtown residents.

“That helps with the overall brand of downtown,” Moses said. “No matter how old you are, you can come downtown and feel comfortable.”

GROWTH OF DOWNTOWN LIVING

It’s hard to get an exact handle on how many people live downtown — roughly the area between the Mississippi River and Cass, La Crosse, Seventh streets — but all indicators point to a population boom.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were about 1,050 residents as of 2010, and there has been considerable residential development during the past decade, including the 92-unit Grand River Station. The latest estimates suggest that number may now be closer to 1,200, and there’s no sign of that growth slowing.

Downtown Mainstreet Inc. estimates there are more than 1,000 dwelling units within the downtown neighborhood and some adjacent blocks — including the apartment complex at Eighth and Main.

With the completion of Belle Square and three other projects, that adds 400 units on the market by the end of 2018.

Assuming a 95 percent occupancy rate and

an average of 1.5 residents per apartment, that translates to about 2,000 downtown residents, double the number at the beginning of the decade.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the demographics have shifted since the last Census, when nearly half of the downtown residents were between the ages of 18 and 29, and almost two-thirds were male.

"It used to be the people who wanted to live downtown were younger and more interested in the party atmosphere," said Marvin Wanders, who has converted the former county administration center on Fourth Street into a 113-unit residential complex. "Now that demographic has shifted to young professionals and empty nesters."

The only complaints: the occasional aroma of methane from City Brewery and the smell of croutons from the nearby Bimbo Bakery.

Phil Addis and his wife, Julie, moved from a house on the North Side into a loft above his downtown law office nearly 15 years ago. At the time, he said, they were among a handful of people living in downtown buildings they owned.

"Now they're all over," said Addis, who owns two other downtown residential properties.

The couple have since had two children, which Addis said has never been a problem.

"If you live downtown, there's really no reason to get in your car and go anywhere else," he said. "Everything you need is downtown."

Wanders said he's not concerned with overbuilding, especially with the planned growth at area institutions and businesses.

"We think there's definitely a short supply of workforce-based housing in our downtown area," he said. "We know that market is not being served."

Without vertical redevelopment of the downtown, La Crosse has little room to grow its population. And Wanders said the additional housing should eventually alleviate the historic shortage of single-family homes for sale.

The availability of affordable, high-quality rental housing is one of the city's biggest barriers

to attracting and retaining young professionals, according to a study by the La Crosse Area Chamber of Commerce.

"The housing market here is traditionally so focused on meeting student housing needs," said executive director Vicki Markussen. "Now with so many millennials coming to La Crosse what we need to adjust to is the next level."

Markussen said this generation wants to live close to work and aren't ready to take on a mortgage or the upkeep of a home, but those moving from outside the area say they have trouble finding that type of rental.

Those who end up renting outside the city are more likely to buy homes there once they are ready to settle down, she said.

But young professionals aren't the only ones interested in the convenience of downtown. Baby Boomers are drawn to the convenience and lifestyle, too.

THRIVING RETAIL

Dedicated business owners such as Deb Lash president of DMI and owner of The Wedding Tree and The Court Above Main and TJ and Michelle Peterslie helped keep the downtown going during the worst times. Lash started working downtown in 1990 and bought The Wedding Tree from its previous owner in 1996, moving the business to its current location at 418 Main St. two years later.

Before the move, Lash remembers shooting a commercial during which she stood out on the street in front of the business. Despite it being the middle of the day, she and the camera crew never had to break thanks to the lack of traffic.

Such challenges didn't stop Lash or the Peterslies from working to improve their pieces of downtown. Lash bought The Wedding Tree building in 2004, renovating the more-than-a-century-old building as her business grew and she decided to expand and create The Court Above Main, a space for weddings and other events.

The Peterslies, with several storefronts on Pearl Street such as The Pearl ice cream parlor and coffee shop, have spent decades reinvesting in the neighborhood and renovating the

historic buildings they own. The duo also has worked closely with other business owners to help develop the block into an inviting place for customers.

"Progress really is like a snowball," Michelle Peterslie said. "It can either move up or down. The community had to work hard to create a positive momentum."

As recently as seven years ago, 20 percent of downtown storefronts were vacant, according to data collected each year by DMI. That number dipped below 10 percent in 2015, and less than 5 percent of downtown retail space was vacant in 2018.

For DMI's part in the turnaround, executive director Robin Moses said it came down to a four-point approach.

First was organizing and getting people together to talk about ideas and solutions. The second was working with businesses on promotions and special events such as Eat Week, which highlights downtown restaurants, or extended hours during peak shopping periods such as the holidays.

Her organization worked with the city on beautification programs such as streetscaping. DMI also helped new businesses locate to the downtown by connecting entrepreneurs with loans and grants.

"In the last five years, we have seen tremendous growth," Moses said. "It's great, but it comes with new challenges as it is tough now for new businesses that want to move in."



RAPID GROWTH LEADS TO \$300 MILLION EXPANSION OF KWIK TRIP SUPPORT CENTER



Carl Rick, Kwik Trip spokesman

STEVE CAHALAN
for the La Crosse Tribune

Kwik Trip has been expanding its presence in a big way in both La Crosse, where a five-year, \$300 million expansion of its support center is under way, and in Madison, where its 2017 acquisition of PDQ Stores has made it a major player in that community.

The support center expansion was needed because La Crosse-based Kwik Trip, which began in 1965 with a store in Eau Claire, has grown to be the nation's 13th largest convenience store chain, according to the CSP (Convenience Store Products) News trade publication. At the end of February, it had 665 stores in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa.

With more than 24,000 employees in the three states, the company plans to open 40 to 50 new stores a year and at least for now is targeting only its current three-state area.

Kwik Trip trucks deliver products from the support center in La Crosse to all of its stores each day.

"We plan to spend about \$500 million a year on capital expenditures for the next five years," said Carl Rick, a Kwik Trip leadership development specialist and company spokesman. "That's \$2.5 billion in five years in the three states that we operate in. The majority of that is on new stores, and we borrow heavily to get half a billion dollars each year."

Rick declined to say what Kwik Trip's annual sales are, adding that it's a privately held company.

\$300 MILLION EXPANSION IS UNDER WAY

In November 2017, Kwik Trip and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. announced a five-year, \$300 million capital investment project for the support center to allow it to meet its needs for the foreseeable future.

WEDC said it has authorized Kwik Trip to receive up to \$21 million in state income tax credits over the five years, contingent on the number of jobs created, the level of capital investment and the amount it spends on purchasing equipment, goods and services from

Wisconsin companies through 2022.

Kwik Trip and WEDC said the five-year project was expected to create more than 300 jobs in the La Crosse area during the next five years.

It already had created 171 jobs by the end of September 2018, according to a project performance report the company filed with the state agency.

About 2,318 employees work at the company's 120-acre support center campus, which includes corporate offices and facilities where Kwik Trip makes its own bakery goods; dairy products; beverages; sandwiches, pizzas, burritos, salads and other foods; and ice, for its stores.

The company's production, distribution, transportation and corporate facilities at the campus covered more than 1 million square feet when the five-year project was announced.

One of the project's biggest parts was construction of a \$113 million, 198,000-square-foot bread and bun bakery. The new bakery began making buns on Nov. 27 and began making bread on Jan. 8, said Eric Fonstad, director of that bakery as well as the company's 212,000-square-foot sweets bakery.

As of late February, about 125 employees were working at the new bakery, while about 275 were working at the sweets bakery, Fonstad told the La Crosse Tribune during a recent tour of the support center.

Production of bread and buns moved from what's now called the sweets bakery, to the new facility, to help meet increasing sales of all of

Kwik Trip's bakery goods. The sweets bakery continues to make such things as doughnuts, long johns, bismarcks, muffins and cookies.

MORE EXPANSION IS ABOUT TO BEGIN

Other major parts of the five-year expansion are coming up soon.

For example, ground is expected to be broken in April for a new store engineering building that should be completed in 12 to 16 months, Rick said. Store engineering employees now work in several other buildings.

"Store engineering is responsible for the construction and maintenance of all buildings at the support center in La Crosse, and all of the retail stores," Rick said. "They also maintain all equipment throughout the company."

Also planned are improvements to the sweets bakery, where work on a 15,000-square-foot freezer began in November and should be finished in April.

And another huge project – at least doubling the size of the current 60,000-square-foot commissary where sandwiches, pizzas and other food items are made – is expected to begin construction in about a year. Construction should take 12 to 16 months for the addition, which is expected to be somewhere between 60,000 and 100,000 square feet in size.

Rick and John McHugh, Kwik Trip's director of public relations, said Kwik Trip is experimenting with fried chicken at its new stores in West Salem and Holmen, and at a few other locations. "If that takes off, we're hoping that would evolve into take-home meals" being sold at Kwik Trip stores, Rick said.

While take-home meals are in the early testing phase, Rick said, "If that goes (well), we would need commissary space to make the take-home meals that would come out to the stores."

The fried chicken program that Kwik Trip is

experimenting with includes side dishes such as beans, green beans, mashed potatoes, and macaroni and cheese.

Kwik Trip is creating a test kitchen for food items in the former Two Beagles Brewpub in Onalaska. "Until we expand our commissary, we are going to use this smaller facility as a test kitchen," McHugh said of the space Kwik Trip is leasing.

"We want to expand food offerings associated with that (chicken) program and need a place to test how we would create those additional items," he said of the test kitchen, which will not

be open to the public.

STORE GROWTH CONTINUES

While Kwik Trip plans to open 40 to 50 new stores a year, Rick said that "We've got 42 new ground-up stores (planned) for this year" and the company probably will tear down and rebuild five or six stores.

Kwik Trip also occasionally buys other convenience stores.

In 2017, it bought the assets of the Middleton, Wis.-based PDQ Stores chain, which has given

Bread and buns sit in an automated picking system before put onto trucks for delivery.





it a major presence in the Madison area. The acquisition included 34 convenience stores, most in the Madison area and the rest in southeastern Wisconsin. Kwik Trip converted 31 of the stores to Kwik Trips, closed three stores and built one that PDQ had been planning to build.

“We’d been working hard to get into Madison for about 10 years and only had two stores to show for it” before the PDQ stores were acquired, Rick said. “So when PDQ became available, it was a place to jump.

“From our perspective, we think it’s worked out great,” Rick said of acquiring the PDQ stores and converting them to Kwik Trips. PDQ had about 266 employees at the stores that were acquired, and employment has increased to about 807 under Kwik Trip, he said.

“They are doing better than expected,” Rick said of sales at the former PDQ stores.

There’s still plenty of room to add Kwik Trip stores in the company’s current three-state area, Rick said. “We’re not in Milwaukee proper,” he said. “We’re not in Racine. We’re not in Minneapolis or St. Paul, we’re not in a number of the suburbs. We’re starting to circle Des Moines as of last year, but we have nothing in Des Moines” and reached the Quad Cities only three years ago.

KWIK TRIP WINS INDUSTRY ACCOLADES

Fast-growing Kwik Trip has received many honors in recent years for its business and employment practices.

For example, it received the 2018 Chain of the Year award from the Convenience Store Decisions trade magazine, which also gave Kwik Trip that award in 2004. The annual award honors a convenience store or petroleum chain that has established itself as a superior retailer and innovator.

In presenting last year’s award, the magazine noted Kwik Trip develops and makes many of its food and beverage products and has its own efficient distribution center and trucking fleet.

Kwik Trip is owned by three generations of the Don and LaVonna Zietlow family, including their three children and 14 grandchildren.

The magazine also noted Kwik Trip has opened employee health centers at its La Crosse campus and in Appleton, Wis., and shares 40 percent of its pre-tax profits with its employees.

“The 40 percent comes back to the co-workers in an annual cash bonus, 401(k) and other bonuses throughout the year,” McHugh said.

While Kwik Trip shares 40 percent of its pretax profits with co-workers, Rick said, another 27.5 percent of pretax profits goes toward taxes, 27.5 percent is reinvested and 5 percent goes to the family that owns Kwik Trip, he said.

Kwik Trip is owned by three generations of the Don and LaVonne Zietlow family, including their three children and 14 grandchildren. “Most of it is actually held by the grandchildren at this point,” Rick said.

In January, gas price tracker GasBuddy said Kwik Trip took first place in its 2018 Top Gas Station Brands rankings, a report based on nearly 7 million consumer ratings and reviews. It said Kwik Trip captured the highest ratings and reviews in four of the six GasBuddy categories: cleanliness, outdoor lighting, restrooms and overall experience.

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Workforce Innovation *for a* Strong Economy

THE WISE PLAN

The 7 Rivers Alliance continued working in 2018 with a committee and task force teams to work on specific strategies to address our declining workforce.

The strategies focus on the areas of Talent Preparation, Talent Recruitment and Talent Retention.

Preparation: Promote programs and activities that build stronger connections between students and business and inform and educate about the opportunities that exist within the region.

Progress so far:

Inspire, a program that connects businesses with students, has been launched and is rolling out in Wisconsin school districts across the region.

7 Rivers Alliance held an internship and apprenticeship event in September, providing information for businesses on best practices.

A group has been meeting with UW-La Crosse to improve connections between businesses and students.

Recruitment: Market the region and its assets, sharing stories and messages of success and inclusion, and ensuring that new families are welcomed and supported.

Progress so far:

A concierge service has been launched by the La Crosse Area Chamber of Commerce.

7 Rivers Alliance and River Valley Media Group have started a joint marketing agreement that has resulted in a new website – Our7Rivers.com – to market the region and

also are publishing an annual magazine.

Retention: Share best practices with the region's employers that support and enhance the experiences of current employees, reduce out-migration and slow the rate of retirements.

Progress so far:

The 7 Rivers Alliance sponsored a series of "Employer of Choice" workshops throughout the region.

The 7 Rivers Alliance participated in a Recruitment and Retention seminar in November to share best practices.

The 7 Rivers Alliance held a Workforce Summit in May to discuss how to hire the disabled, how to hire veterans and how to hire the recently incarcerated.

A wage study of the region is being shared with employers and businesses.

The 7 Rivers Alliance is working with regional groups looking at various child care options and a survey of La Crosse County businesses and parents was completed.

KEY WISE PLAN GOALS

- ▶ Increase student and worker employability skills
- ▶ Inclusive regional communities to better attract minorities
- ▶ Educate students, educators, parents, and other community members about the educational requirements for high paying, in-demand careers
- ▶ Prepare incumbent workers and mature jobseekers to have greater flexibility in the workplace
- ▶ Promote the 7 Rivers Region to targeted groups about the region's benefits
- ▶ Foster and support underrepresented individuals
- ▶ Assist and engage newly arriving families to area communities
- ▶ Provide businesses and jobseekers with comparative economic information
- ▶ Ensure the availability of affordable housing for the region's workforce
- ▶ Provide information and tools that help companies prepare for pending retirements
- ▶ Develop public-private childcare partnerships to increase childcare facility capacity and address affordability gaps
- ▶ Bolster more connections and relationships between currently enrolled students, regional employers, and local communities
- ▶ Inspire businesses to implement initiatives that position them as "Employers of Choice"
- ▶ Improve transit, ridesharing and multi-modal transportation options, and make transportation system more accessible

KEY WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

- ▶ Declining population
- ▶ Aging workforce
- ▶ Misperceptions about the region's employment opportunities
- ▶ Mismatch of skills between what is being produced by the region's post-secondary institutions and the needs of local employers
- ▶ Lack of diversity within the region
- ▶ Outmigration and out-commuting
- ▶ Limited childcare options and affordability
- ▶ Attracting people to the area
- ▶ Competition from nearby employment centers



The Inspire 7 Rivers initiative launched first in The Black River Falls School District in January of 2018 and has been rapidly expanding into the Wisconsin school districts.

The program links education and industry, in order to help students and job seekers achieve their goals and address communities' workforce development needs. The Inspire 7 Rivers platform is a secure way for students to connect with potential employers and career coaches in school districts. There are more than 100 companies and 100 career coaches active in the Inspire program so far, and we continue to grow this program, reaching a greater number of industries and career types, giving students snapshot of a broad range of career paths and the skills needed to be successful in that field. Signing up for INSPIRE 7 Rivers takes less than 5 minutes to fill out your profile. Register today by going to our website and clicking the INSPIRE tab.

www.7riversalliance.org/inspire-7rivers

WISE PLAN AIMS TO OVERCOME WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

The 7 Rivers Alliance region, which includes 14 counties in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa, faces the same major workforce challenges that regions face.

But there's a difference in the 7 Rivers Region: There's a plan to meet the challenge.

The alliance's Workforce Innovation for a Strong Economy Plan, a 10-year workforce development plan launched in November 2017, is aimed at overcoming them by helping ensure there will be enough workers.

According to the WISE Plan, an estimated 15,321 net new jobs are expected to be created in the 7 Rivers Region during the next 10 years, but because of out-migration and retirements, the region is expected to lose a net of 228 workers during the 10-year period.

According to the plan, the region needs to attract and retain 1,500 to 2,000 more workers each year during the next decade to keep up with employer demand.

The plan is the result of a nearly yearlong

effort to understand and address the workforce preparation, retention and recruitment challenges in the region, said Chris Hardie, who became the alliance's CEO in September 2017. The alliance is an economic development membership organization.

WISE strategies focus on three major areas – talent preparation, talent recruitment and talent retention.

Listed under each of those three areas is a series of goals. And listed under each goal are strategies for meeting that goal as well as prospective “champions” such as particular businesses, associations and educational institutions that can work with others in “action groups” to implement those strategies. The plan identifies short-term, medium-term and long-term strategies.

Some examples of talent preparation strategies in the plan include programs and activities that build stronger connections between students and businesses, and inform

and educate guidance and career counselors and others influencing adults about opportunities that exist in the region.

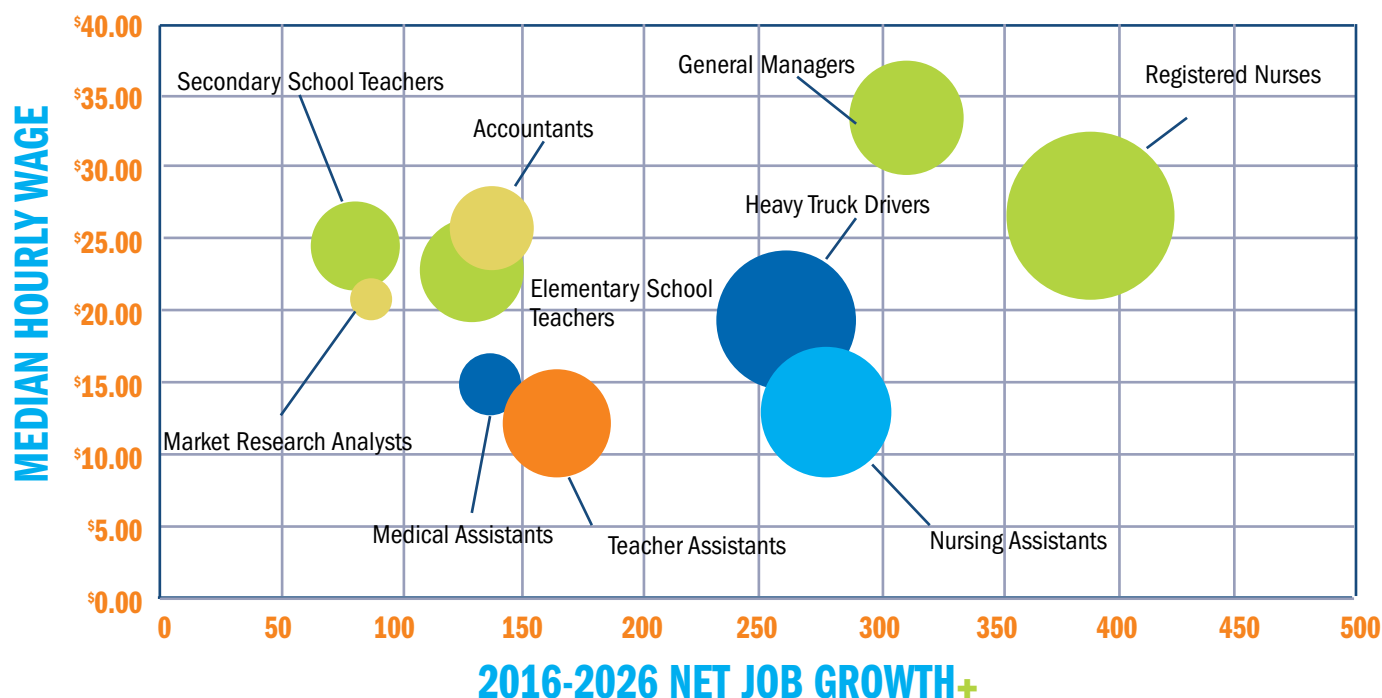
Some talent recruitment strategies in the plan include marketing the region to well-defined targets, sharing stories and messages of success and inclusion, and ensuring that new families are welcomed and supported when they arrive.

Some talent-retention strategies outlined in the plan include sharing best practices with employers in the region, and analyzing the region's child-care needs as well as identifying and supporting public policy changes that would address child-care availability and affordability issues.

AREA WAGES

The graphic from the WISE Plan (Chart A) shows that area wages are well below national averages. As workers become increasingly mobile, they are attracted to better-paying jobs elsewhere, the plan notes.

10 FASTEST GROWING OCCUPATIONS



The need for additional child care and affordable housing, and transportation issues, are three of the major challenges identified in the study, Hardie noted.

For example, Hardie said, “We’re seeing people who are working part time or who are having to drop out of the workforce because they can’t find providers to take care of their kids. And that becomes a recruitment challenge for us as well. Because if you’re a business looking to hire a worker, one of the first questions the worker has if they have kids is, ‘What’s the day care situation?’ ”

Some of the many other challenges mentioned in the WISE Plan include an aging workforce, misperceptions about the region’s employment opportunities, a mismatch of skills between what is being produced by the region’s post-secondary institutions and the needs of local employers, a lack of diversity within the region, and local wages that are well below national averages.

Implementing the plan requires lots of involvement by individuals and organizations.

“In order for this plan to be successful, we have to have a number of people, organizations and companies helping to carry them through,” Hardie said. “This is a 7 Rivers Alliance plan, but it’s too big for us to be able to do it” without a lot of help.

WORKFORCE GAP

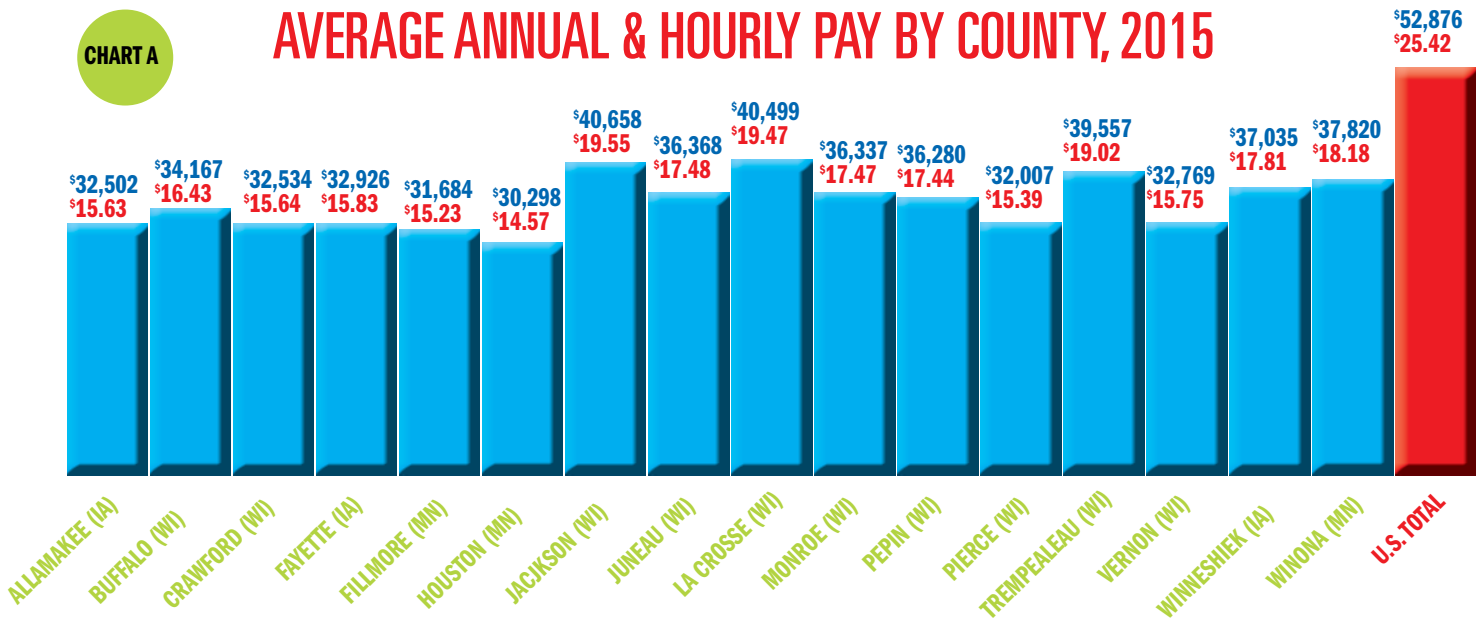
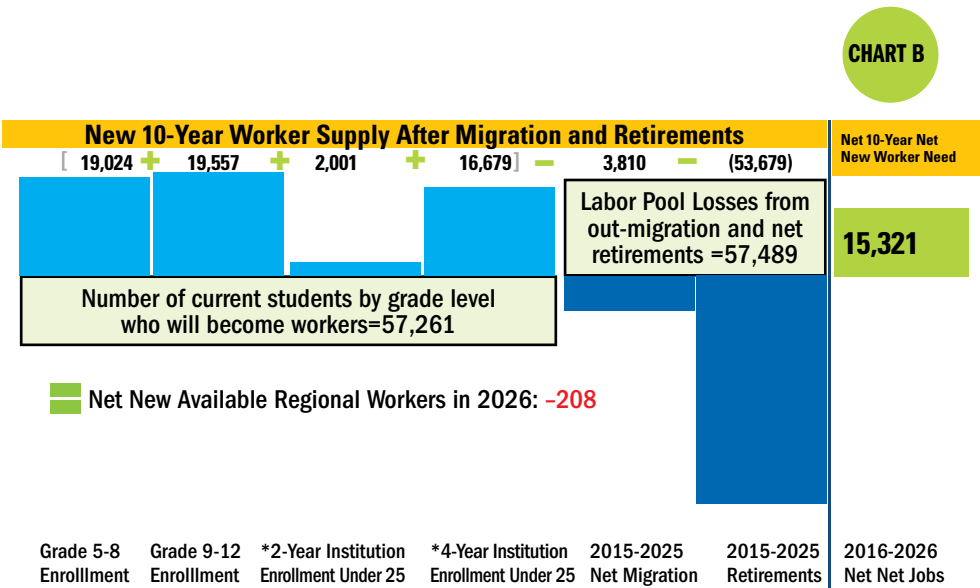
The graphic from the WISE Plan (Chart B) shows that 15,321 net new jobs are expected to be created in the 7 Rivers Region during the next 10 years, but because of out-migration and retirements, the region is expected to lose a net of 228 workers during the 10-year period. According to the plan, the region needs to attract and retain 1,500 to 2,000 more workers each year during the next decade just to keep pace.

“A lot of the (action) groups have been formed,” Hardie said of the groups that will drive the strategies outlined in the plan. “Some

have met and some have not. A lot of it depends on whether it involves the short-term or the medium-term or the long-term” strategies.

Updates on the plan’s implementation and progress was given at the alliance’s annual State of the Region meetings.

In 2017, the 7 Rivers Alliance Foundation was created and received its 501(c)(3) certification from the Internal Revenue Service as a tax-exempt, charitable organization. The foundation will be able to apply for grants to help pay for implementing strategies outlined in the plan, Hardie said.



Organic Valley is still blazing trails



JENNIFER LU
La Crosse Tribune

While “organic” and “sustainable” are sometimes used interchangeably, they aren’t synonymous. It’s possible to be one without the other, though the goals often align.

Organic food, defined by the Organic Foods Production Act under the 1990 Farm Bill, emphasizes the use of renewable resources and soil and water conservation techniques and eschews conventional pesticides, growth hormones and antibiotics, synthetic fertilizers, and bioengineering or ionizing radiation.

Sustainable agriculture, less formally defined, focuses on supporting economically, socially and environmentally viable farming practices

that allow future generations to thrive.

Organic Valley, an organic farming cooperative, is invested in both.

“Sustainability has been part of our mission since day one,” said Elizabeth McMullen, spokesperson for Organic Valley. “One of our goals as a part of our mission was to encourage a farming future emphasizing ecological and economic sustainability.”

The co-op formed 31 years ago with seven farmers as a rebuttal to farm consolidations and large-scale conventional farming practices. Under the co-op’s profit-sharing model, 45 percent of the profit goes to farmers, 45 percent to employees and 10 percent returns to the community.

The Coulee Region-headquartered cooperative’s sustainable projects include limiting greenhouse gases on farms, investing in renewable energy and reducing the amount of agricultural waste going to the landfill.

Greenhouse gases from the agricultural sector have increased about 17 percent since 1990. The agricultural sector emits about 9 percent of total greenhouse gases produced by the U.S., according to 2016 data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Last year, Organic Valley started a pilot program on three member farms to reduce their carbon footprints, said Nicole Rakobitsch, a sustainability manager at Organic Valley.

The program coincides with a California law



requiring dairy farms to reduce short-lived but powerful greenhouse gas emission by 40 percent by 2030.

Organic Valley's pilot program implements three carbon-limiting techniques that improve manure management practices and increase on-farm carbon sequestration.

Many dairy farms store their manure in liquid form in lagoons, a storage method that reduces labor, but has increased the amount of greenhouse gases emitted since the 1990s. Manure flushed from grates beneath the pens end up in wet, oxygen-poor environments. Under those conditions, the manure breaks down to release ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, carbon dioxide and methane, a greenhouse gas that's 25 times more potent than carbon dioxide over a 100-year period.

Switching to a dry manure storage system would reduce methane emission, Rakobitsch said.

Additionally, farmers in the pilot program would plant trees and shrubs to form riparian forest buffers that sequester carbon, Rakobitsch said. And they would apply a half inch of compost to pasture lands to increase carbon sequestration in soil.

Organic Valley also has an energy efficiency program that's popular among farmers, Rakobitsch said. The program helps farmers install renewable energy projects, mainly solar but also a few small wind projects. The systems generate about 20 kilowatts each, enough to offset some to most of the farm's electricity bill, depending on the size of the farm, Rakobitsch said.

In a separate project to reduce waste, Organic Valley partners with farmers to help them recycle agricultural plastic used to store feed



and mulch plants.

"Modern farms use a lot of plastic," Rakobitsch said. "Farmers want to recycle their ag plastic but there's not a lot of companies that do it. It's one of the ongoing challenges throughout the country, really."

According to a 2015 survey organized by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the Solid and Hazardous Waste Education Center of the University of Wisconsin–Extension, and Organic Valley Cooperative, a majority of respondents said they generated about 500 pounds or fewer of agricultural or boat plastic per year, much of which is sent to landfills or burned.

To address this problem, Organic Valley set up a special collection to send the plastic to ag recycling company Delta Plastics, because agricultural plastics are recycled separately from household plastics.

The co-op collected 32.15 tons of bale wrap, silage bags and bunker covers for recycling in 2016.

Organic Valley by the numbers

1.1 billion in sales

Approximately 2,000
member farms
in 35 U.S. states, as well
as Canada, Australia and
the United Kingdom
and about 950 employees
within the cooperative

Dairy pay price
(national average
at the end of 2018)
of \$29.75



Dairyland Power the invisible visible

JENNIFER LU
La Crosse Tribune

Barbara Nick, president and CEO of the Dairyland Power Cooperative electric utility, wants you to consider where your electricity comes from.

“If you think about it, we have an invisible product,” Nick said. “It’s light, it’s heat, it’s power.”

Nick is on a mission to make the invisible visible and the visible valuable — just like the old marketing adage, she said. It’s part of the electric co-op’s strategy to make its presence known through its product and its workforce, as well as to recruit and retain employees in the Coulee Region.

The wholesale electric company, headquartered in La Crosse, provides power for 24 member systems and 17 municipal customers across Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois. Its transmission lines span 3,200 miles and includes 300 substations over the system’s 44,500-square-mile coverage area.

However, Dairyland, which has 550 employees that range from line electricians to engineers and graphic designers, is not immune to the worker shortage that’s hitting Wisconsin. The electric utility anticipates a wave of openings in the near future as employees reach retirement age, and is planning accordingly.

“I think it’s a challenge for our industry because no one in middle school or high school says, ‘wow, I want to work for a

utility,” Nick said. “I just don’t think it’s on their radar screen. It’s not as sexy as Google or Amazon, but what we do is complicated and very technical.”

To get the word out, Nick works with high schools and colleges to sponsor business programs for high school students and judge robotics competitions.

Dairyland also partners with Western Technical College and Chippewa Valley Technical College to offer telecommunication internships and line electrician apprenticeships.

Steven Blankenship, a telecommunications technical assistant, was introduced to Dairyland through an internship during his first year in the Electronics and Computer Engineering Technology program at Western.

Although he didn’t see how telecommunications fit into the electric utility sphere — Dairyland has its own internal telecommunications network — he said he learned a lot about IT networks and how data is collected from substations through his internship.

Blankenship interned at Dairyland again in his second year and was hired when a position became open. Many of his coworkers in the telecommunications department also came to the company through the internship program as well, Blankenship said.

The experience “pretty much made my schooling worth it right from the get-go,” he said.

makes the the visible valuable

Blankenship, who has a family, said he appreciates that his employers value work-life balance, community service and continued job training.

His bosses understand if he needs time off on short notice when his kids get sick, he said. Blankenship also volunteered on a team put together by his supervisor to help install network cables, security cameras, PA systems and network access at Luther High School addition in Onalaska.

And he's been sent to job training on new equipment every year since he started, he said.

"I expect people to stay current in their skills," Nick said. She also started a leadership training program for employees when she came to Dairyland, which about half the company has taken so far, she said.

"My view is that everyone's a leader at what they do, so it's about helping us be more effective in our interpersonal skills as well as our work skills," Nick said. "I think that's part of the DNA of the people who work there."



“ *My view is that everyone's a leader at what they do, so it's about helping us be more effective in our interpersonal skills as well as our work skills. I think that's part of the DNA of the people who work there.* ”

– Barbara Nick

Dairyland Power Cooperative by the numbers

- 24 member systems
- 6 billion kilowatt-hours in sales
- 3,200 miles of transmission lines
- Owns two coal-fired power plants, a 30 percent ownership interest in another coal-fired power plant, a natural gas plant, and a hydroelectric plant
- has power purchase agreements at 20 solar sites, three winds sites that generate 20 MW or greater, a hydrostation, and two landfill gas-to-energy facilities
- helped developed 250 acres of pollinator habitat at 18 solar facilities
- 17 municipal customers
- 550 employees
- 300 substations





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A GROWING COMMUNITY SINCE 1883

Support for older workers

DEVELOPMENT CENTER OFFERS FREE SERVICES

BY EMILY PYREK
La Crosse Tribune

By 2022, the Bureau of Labor Statistics anticipates nearly 32 percent of people ages 65 to 74 will still be working. But for many mature individuals, simply finding work is the greatest obstacle.

Whether due to an outdated skill set, higher wage expectations or simply age bias, workers in their 40s and beyond spend longer times being unemployed than their younger counterparts, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office. For those who are struggling to find or keep employment in their later years, the Western Wisconsin Workforce Development Center offers myriad services and programs, free of charge.

"Our job center staff do not see age as an obstacle," said Kathleen Olson, Western district director for Wisconsin Job Service. "They see it as an opportunity for more experienced workers to turn a perceived negative into an opportunity to effectively market their experience and knowledge, without undermining themselves in a competitive job market."

The Workforce Development Center served 16,883 people in La Crosse, and 2,174 in Tomah, from July 2017 through June 2018, helping both new and seasoned workers find meaningful employment in their community. Many more utilize the Job Service Call Center and Job Center of Wisconsin online services. Web based resources include WISCareers, Career Cruising, CareerOneStop and Skill Explorer, and WDC hosts job fairs annually.

Onsite, staff help job seekers with filling out job applications, writing resumes and cover

"We offer encouragement and hope to those who struggle to regain the dignity and independence that comes with suitable work."

— Kathleen Olson

letters that effectively communicate their abilities and accomplishments and preparing for interviews. Those new to certain technologies and social media are walked through digital job search strategies, including LinkedIn, and the WDC provides labor market information to help job seekers set realistic employment goals. By helping job seekers identify their transferable skills or competencies, and providing training to update their skill set, WDC programs ensure they are able to adapt to changes in the industries. Classes on networking, financial literacy and financial coaching and basic computer skills are offered regularly.

"More mature job seekers often times have the experience, but lack the formal credentials and/or education that businesses sometimes require, which could be an obstacle," Olson said.

Services designed for those 55 and older include Wisconsin Senior Employment, which

offers paid work and skill-building experiences, and the Foster Grandparent Program, a tutoring opportunity with a stipend. Programs or referrals to other services are available for individuals with potential employment barriers, including disabilities, poverty or criminal offenses. "Strategies for the 40+ Job Seeker" and "Generations in the Workplace" are formulated specifically for middle-age prospective employees. The former helps job seekers contradict ageist stereotypes, highlighting their valuable traits and knowledge and reworking their resumes to attract current employers. The latter talks through potential conflicts with bosses or coworkers of a different generation, from management methods to work ethic, and how to broach them.

Prospective employees of all ages can benefit from brushing up on basic etiquette and communication skills through the WDC's mock interviews and "Dress for Success" course on proper work attire and body language.

The Workforce Development Center also advocates on behalf of its patrons, discussing with employers "the positive benefits of having an age-diverse workplace, and the benefits that older workers can bring to their business," Olson says.

Most of all, Olson says, "We offer encouragement and hope to those who struggle to regain the dignity and independence that comes with suitable work."

For more information on the Western Wisconsin Workforce Development Center and a program schedule, visit www.wisconsinjobcenter.org.

A pipeline for talent

INSPIRE 7 RIVERS INITIATIVE CONNECTS STUDENTS, EMPLOYERS

BY EMILY PYREK
La Crosse Tribune

A new program is giving area high school students a head start on their post-graduation job searches, offering both online and in-person connections with potential employers.

The Inspire 7 Rivers initiative, founded by the 7 Rivers Alliance, rolled out in May 2017 at school districts in Black River Falls, Holmen, Tomah, Hillsboro, and Blair-Taylor, bringing Onalaska schools into the fold in spring 2018 and branching into the La Crosse School District this fall. The goal is to have all the public school districts in the Wisconsin part of The 7 Rivers Region activated by the fall of 2019.

Linking education and industry, the Inspire program introduces students to potential jobs through career coaches, who answer questions, offer advice and give students an up-close look at the workforce.

Currently, 120 employers and 109 retirees or independent business people offer their coaching skills free of charge in return for being introduced to a roster of potential employees and increasing visibility for their company.

“Several employers are chomping at the bit to get engaged in the program,” said Jeff Scheel, coordinator for Inspire 7 Rivers. “It’s a new pipeline for talent.”

Last school year, 1,000 students were active in Inspire, which expands on the Career Cruising software system used by schools across the state, as mandated by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Academic and Career Planning requirements.

Throughout the 2018-19 school year, up to



Smith's Bike Shop owner Erik Pueschner, left, works with high school students Josh Perry, middle, and Seth Petersen. Smith's Bike Shop is one of the participating businesses in the 7 Rivers Inspire program. The program connects high school students with local employers to explore career options.

5,000 students in 11 districts will be introduced to Inspire, with additional districts to be added during the next 15 months.

“The Inspire program is more about providing

students with current, accurate information about today's and tomorrow's careers and the possibilities within those careers, especially in this region,” said Sherri Torkelson, director of

CESA 4. “Students complete interest inventories and so on through the Career Cruising software, and then can use the Inspire section to explore areas they seem to have an aptitude for and/or interest in.”

Businesses participating in Inspire include Gundersen Health System, Trane, Kwik Trip, Brenengen Motors and Citizens State Bank, and the program is endorsed by the La Crosse Area Society for Human Resources Management and the Upper Mississippi Manufacturing Management Association.

Inspire operates in both online and onsite facets, with web message boards serving as the primary form of communication. Coaches may conduct mock interviews, explain skill sets needed for specific careers, help with resumes or answer queries on jobs ranging from artist to police officer.

“It’s any career field at all these kids can ask questions about,” Scheel said. “If they’re interested in nursing, they can talk to nurses. They can reach out to an actual employer and get up-to-date information. Until now it’s been hypothetical. It’s pretty exciting to get engaged in this.”

Coaches assist with mapping out training or certification needed for their career of choice, from apprenticeships to degrees, and advising on curriculum.

Guidance for both those pursuing secondary education and those jumping right into full-time work is provided.

Guest speakers and career fairs allow for face-to-face interaction, and students may have hands-on opportunities through job shadows, company tours and internships. Employers have the option to offer students youth apprenticeship or paid work experiences.

Randi Serres, owner of Smith’s Bike Shop, employs two Logan High School students and hopes to recruit future talent through Inspire. Serres and Smith’s Bike Shop staff members will serve as Inspire coaches when the program extends to La Crosse during the fall semester.

“I think Inspire is going to be very helpful for both small businesses and the students,” Serres said. “We’ll be able to see who has a passion and have more avenues to reach them. I think it will be easier for us to get the word out that we hire high school students, and (give us) less of a gap


when we need someone. ... High schoolers are very open and receptive — they don’t come in with an preconceived notions.”

As part-time workers at Smith’s, Josh Perry and Seth Petersen, both 17, have been trained in bike mechanics and will be introduced to sales and the many aspects of running a business with hands-on instruction from staff.

Perry, who uses Career Cruising at Logan, says the program gave him a place to start, having had no idea what he wanted to pursue post high school. Inspire, he believes, will be another tool for himself and other students to map out their futures with the help of knowledgeable adults.

“I feel like high school students are intimidated to go out and talk to business owners,” Perry said. “Students won’t have to go in knowing everything. (The coaches) will teach us.”

Linking education and industry, the Inspire program introduces students to potential jobs through career coaches, who answer questions, offer advice and give students an up-close look at the workforce.



WESTERN, LOCAL HIGH SCHOOLS PAVE STUDENTS' PATH TO WORKFORCE

BY KYLE FARRIS
La Crosse Tribune

Western Technical College and area high schools are partnering to give students the expertise to fill jobs in manufacturing or business or medicine — plus the communication skills to ace the interview.

Western's transcribed credit program was started more than a decade ago but has picked up steam in recent years, with thousands of young people — from Independence, to Mauston, to many towns in between — earning college credit while still in high school.

"Some students take these courses because they're interested in it, some can see themselves in that career, and some just heard that the teacher was really nice," said Sam Russ, principal of Sparta High School, which partners with Western on 12 transcribed courses.

"You should see the smiles on these students' faces when they finish a course and have anywhere between one to four college credits," he said. "We're so very proud of our program and hope we can help it grow."

Western partners with high schools in a wide array of disciplines: animal science, personal investing, welding, blueprint reading, culinary fundamentals and more.

To make the credits transferable, high school teachers must become certified in the Western

course they wish to teach. Certification requires work either over the summer or outside the school day — a sacrifice that, according to Russ, teachers have been willing, if not eager, to make.

"The engagement has been great," he said. "Teachers know how powerful of a program this can be for kids."

Tyler Ludeking, K-12 relations specialist at Western, said the college and school districts are trying to reach students earlier and earlier. If they know their options, he said, seventh- and eighth-graders are more likely to enter high school with a clear and purposeful mindset.

By the time they graduate, some will have a semester's worth of college credit or a certificate in a technical skill.

Others, Ludeking said, will already have a job



Gracie Teumer, a senior at Necedah High School, works on a three-way light switch Friday at Western Technical College's inaugural Explore the Trades event.



Isabel Sartor, a junior at Whitehall High School, works on a three-way light switch as instructor Carl Newman looks on at Western Technical College's inaugural Explore the Trades event.

lined up.

"We're giving them a great starting point by offering these credits for free while they're in high school," he said. "In some cases, if a student has earned a technical diploma or certificate, they go right into the workforce. I like to say that they know enough to be dangerous."

School districts have also started to emphasize soft skills — such as communication, responsibility and resume writing — which often get overlooked in a K-12 setting.

Western has added two transcribed courses to help with this: "Professionalism and Success" and "Quality Customer Service."

"We're providing both the base of skills that students need to go into the workforce, as well as the people skills that employers are looking

for," Ludeking said. "Some employers are even looking for the people skills more than they're looking for the knowledge base."

Russ said the partnership has been transformative for Sparta High School and life-changing for many of its students and graduates.

Programs like this one can be especially impactful in places like Monroe County, he said, because many families there are struggling to make ends meet.

"We're a school district of poverty, and Monroe County is a county of poverty," Russ said. "We're fortunate that kids have these post-secondary opportunities. You need post-secondary education to be more productive in society and ensure yourself a better future."



ACADEMIES GIVE STUDENTS INSIDE TRACK IN INDUSTRY

West Salem has automotive and diesel.

Holmen High School has agriscience.

And Onalaska High School has technology and engineering.

BY KYLE FARRIS
La Crosse Tribune

Paul Liethen hates that the automotive and diesel program seems to be the best-kept secret at West Salem High School.

“On one hand, students who have enrolled in the program seem to love it,” said Liethen, the lead instructor. “On the other hand, automotive and similar programs are the last thing that many students seem to think about. We’re doing great work with these students, and nobody seems to care.”

Area school districts in recent years have launched specialized programs or academies meant to help students master crafts and trades that are seldom a part of core instruction.

West Salem has automotive and diesel.

Holmen High School has agriscience.

And Onalaska High School has technology and engineering.

These programs not only allow students to zero in on their hobby or passion — they also help students parlay their knowledge and technical skills into a career, which can mitigate worker shortages in the process.

“One of the things everyone is finding in all trade areas is high school students, and their parents, too, are a little apprehensive about going into these areas,” said Liethen, noting the stigma around blue-collar jobs. “We’re trying to cut through the red tape and give kids these opportunities.”

Students who enroll in these programs — they’re open to students from other districts, as well — spend a sizeable chunk of the school day learning their specific craft, usually three or four hours. If they start as underclassmen, they can move on to more advanced classes as they near graduation.

But students also have the opportunity to pick and choose from a diverse set of topics.



Students in the Holmen High School agriscience program conduct a germination lab as part of a class on greenhouses. Recently, area schools have touted specialized programs meant to help students master crafts and trades that are seldom a part of core instruction.

Roger King, who runs Holmen’s agriscience program, said students can take classes in animal health, greenhouses, wildlife ecology, fishery ecology, forestry, leadership and many other subjects.

“Traditionally, we don’t really say that we’re focusing on farming — but everything that relates to agriculture,” King said. “I want our animal science class to focus on good nutrition in growing an animal. In our leadership class, I want students who will be leaders in setting policy that will help producers grow quality food.”

“Industry comes to me all the time and says they want students to know what opportunities and options are out there,” he said. “Veterinarians are an ag business, feed companies, organic producers. We’re bombarded with that.”

In West Salem, Liethen sees a similar need for mechanics, technicians and other professionals who work with cars.

Some dealerships are so eager to recruit new workers, he said, that they’ll even pay for a

prospective employee to go to college.

And Liethen hopes to keep funneling qualified workers into the industry.

In February 2018, voters approved a \$1.5 million referendum that has gone, in part, toward a renovation of the automotive lab at West Salem High.

The expanded facility will allow students to work on seven cars at a time, instead of three. It will also have the room to receive semi-trucks without students having to remove the smokestacks.

“We’ve been working out of an old maintenance facility from the 1960s,” said Liethen, adding that he’s accepting donations for new equipment. “It’s been a pretty good ... but this is really going to be a nice space.”

It would be a bonus, Liethen said, if the new facility attracts more students to the program.

“It seems like everyone is focused on band, choir and athletics,” he said. “They forget that we’re looking for technicians, too.”

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LOCAL FRANCHISES DIVERSIFY WORKFORCE

Loggers, Speedway recruit for changing needs

BY JEFF BROWN
La Crosse Tribune

Chris Goodell and Chuck Deery, two general managers in entirely different businesses, have witnessed incredible change during the past 15 years, and they've led their organizations through necessary diversification.

And they understand this is only the beginning.

Goodell and Deery both make their living in the entertainment business — Goodell is the only GM the La Crosse Loggers have had in 16 years, while Deery has been the GM of the La Crosse Fairgrounds Speedway since 1987.

Each has seen their core products — baseball and racing — remain solid while other events at their venues have solidified their overall business.

And, in turn, changed their workforce.

The Loggers, who employ four full-time workers and 80 part-time employees and interns on game day, have watched their workforce change from high school and college-age to workers of all ages — even retirees.

The Fairgrounds Speedway, with one full-time employee and 60 part-time workers during Saturday night's main weekly race event, relies on a staff that is 70 percent under the age of 21,

Deery said.

Changing with the times and staying competitive in a market where there are numerous entertainment options hasn't been easy, nor has been maintaining a steady workforce.

"In 2003, we were not thinking about hosting country concerts or MMA fights. We were trying to get the warning track (dirt) smoothed out in order to host a baseball game," Goodell said of the Loggers' opening night in June 2003.

"This is a beautiful area and there are a lot of entertainment options. If we don't evolve and change and listen to them, it goes back to the



old saying: 'If you are not moving forward, you are dying.'"

With the Loggers and the Speedway both being seasonal outdoor entertainment venues, there are limited days in which they host events — and sell tickets.

The Loggers host 36 Northwoods League baseball games at Copeland Park, plus another 20 or more events at the city-owned facility on La Crosse's North Side, such as concerts, movie nights, music acts and even food-related events like wingfest.

While not directly affiliated with the Loggers, the Copeland Park and Events Center also hosts college baseball games (UW-La Crosse and Western) as well as high school games (Central) and American Legion (La Crosse Post 52).

"It is not like 10 or 12 years ago in this league where the fall was really quiet (after the Northwoods League season ended)," Goodell said.

"We will be well north of 50 events with eight movie nights, a concert, wingfest, beerfest (craft beer event) hosting the parade marshals, those types of things."

While the Fairgrounds Speedway, which is just one of three NASCAR-sanctioned tracks in Wisconsin, uses its five-eighth's mile oval track as its main draw, Deery added Friday night Street Drags 11 years ago. That has proven to be a successful addition to racing, as have other novelty events.

The Eve of Destruction, which takes place after the racing regular season, draws thousands of fans to the facility, located on the La Crosse Interstate Fairgrounds in West Salem.

"We have tried to satisfy people's changing interests with Street Drags, Eve of Destruction. They are motorized events, but a different style of motorized events. Staffing those events is

not hard as we are in the fun business.

"It is still work, but it is at a fun place."

Each business has its general workforce as well as specialty areas that require different types of workers. The Loggers needed a different type of skilled worker — and a new level of training — in 2013 when it installed a video board in left-center field. Then came video streaming, where people can watch the games live on their computer.

"The video board is one thing by itself, and we video stream games, too, which is all part of our video team. We have six people on our video team — three camera operators, two controllers and one in the press box," Goodell said.

"And that doesn't include that we contract out with a company to hook it up and set it up," he said.

The Speedway has made its technological advances, too, as cars in the upper tier divisions are equipped with transponders, which send signals to a computer that tracks speed, lap time and other critical information.

Technology doesn't change the workforce needs at either the Loggers or the Speedway, but does change what they do and how they do it. One thing that hasn't changed at either place is customer service and worker attitude.

"We tend to have many of the same workers (regardless of the event)," said Goodell, explaining the Loggers typically employ up to two dozen college interns. "They know us, we know them. We expect the same type of customer service."

Ditto for Deery, who said the Speedway provides a lot of first-time jobs for high school-age workers.

"We hire a lot of people who are experiencing their first job, and they have the knowledge they are committing to work weekends or whenever we have an event," Deery said.



CHRIS GOODELL



CHUCK DEERY

"One of the things they quickly learn is that showing up for work does not constitute work. The kids that work hard, use their head and have the best work ethic quickly move up the ranks at the Speedway.

(LEFT) Fans wave to the drivers at the start of the ARCA Midwest Tour Oktoberfest 200 at the La Crosse Fairgrounds Speedway. The West Salem facility continues to draw thousands of fans each season for racing, as well as other events, including Friday night Street Drags.



La Crosse Loggers General Manager Chris Goodell, left, and manager Brian Lewis, pose in front of home plate at Copland Park. In 16 seasons, the Northwoods League team has drawn more than 1.5 million fans in its history, but the facility is used for much more than baseball. Last summer the venue hosted a country concert, movies and even dueling pianos.

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Rising Stars Under 40



Amanda Hedlund, executive director of Habitat for Humanity Winona-Fillmore Counties, is presented her Rising Stars Under 40 award by Heather Pronschinske, administrative director at Gundersen Health System, as Chris Hardie, chief executive officer at 7 Rivers Alliance looks on during the winners reception at Pettibone Boat Club. Twenty young professionals from a 14-county region of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa were honored. Rising Stars Under 40 is sponsored by the 7 Rivers Alliance and River Valley Media Group. Gundersen Health System is the reception sponsor.

RISING STARS

The 7 Rivers Alliance and River Valley Media Group held its third annual Rising Stars Under 40, honoring and celebrating men and women in our region under the age of 40 who make a difference in their community and in their industry. The winners were selected from dozens of nominations submitted by peers from throughout the region.

NAME	EMPLOYER	HOME COMMUNITY
Amanda Hedlund	Habitat for Humanity	Winona
Alica Suessmith	Dynamic Recycling	Winona
Kristin Franks	Edward Jones	Black River Falls
Joe Protz	City of Tomah	Tomah
Kristen Gust	Century Foods	Sparta
Adam Sonntag	City of Hillsboro	Hillsboro
Jacob Kanis	Nelson True Value Agricenter	Prairie du Chien
Amanda and Jeremiah Ninneman	The Wired Rooster	Caledonia
Darrek Orwig	Trempealeau County	Whitehall
Kelly Sackmaster	Winona Area Humane Society	Fountain City
Michelle Barness	Upper Explorerland	Decorah
Stephanie Neumann	Gundersen Health Systems	La Crescent
Caroline Gregerson	City of La Crosse	La Crosse
Carolyn Flock	Mayo	La Crosse
Juan Jimanez	Western	La Crosse
Matt Boschcka	Dublin Square	La Crosse
Adam Fleis	Fleis Insurance	Onalaska
Josh Blum	WISDOT	La Crosse
Scott Butler	Fitzpatrick & Skemp	La Crosse

Prairie Industries buttons up manufacturing void

SUSAN CANTINE-MAXSON
Waukon Standard

Two businesses have filled the gap left by the closing of the Blumenthal-Lansing button factory in 2016 in Lansing. Tumbleweed Welding and Prairie Industries are operating in the former button factory.

When news of the closing of the button plant hit the local area, it was the end of an era

Many people in Lansing and the surrounding area, along with generations of their families, had worked at the facility all of their lives. There had been button factories in Lansing since the 1800s, and the building sat idle after announcement of the Blumenthal closing next to a vacant lot where the Northern Engraving building had once been as well.

Many wondered if this building would meet the same fate, including the 70 employees who were left without jobs. The future seemed grim.

Yet, shortly after the Blumenthal closing was announced, through the vision and hard work of many individuals who industriously sought to bring in a new facility to utilize the space, the future of the building has been turned around as both Tumbleweed Welding and Prairie Industries perform their respective specialties while sharing the building space.

Valerie Reinke, executive director of Allamakee County Economic Development & Tourism, stated, "The opportunity to work with Prairie Industries and Tumbleweed Welding has been a pleasure. Tumbleweed Welding purchased the Blumenthal building with the plan to relocate their operation there and lease out 70,000 of the 100,000 square foot facility. Tumbleweed Welding wanted to bring in a business that would include jobs. The word on the street was Prairie Industries was looking to expand, so Tumbleweed Welding reached out. In turn, Prairie Industries needed to know there was a

workforce available.

"The efforts by locals attracted more than 200 applicants. Prairie Industries opened its doors to (Lansing) Mayor (Mike) Brennan, Main Street Lansing Director Craig White, Allamakee County Board of Supervisors Chairman Larry Schellhammer, and myself at Economic Development. Prairie Industries shared their vision and a tour of their facility in Prairie du Chien, Wis. It has been very exciting to drive by the Blumenthal building and see cars in the parking lot, trucks at the docks, and signs with new business names. Allamakee County Economic Development welcomes Prairie Industries to Lansing, Allamakee County and northeast Iowa. And special thanks goes to Tumbleweed Welding!"

Tumbleweed Welding has been serving the asphalt industry for over 20 years through sales and service of a wide range of products. It services and creates a specialized line of bins, conveyors and control houses for the asphalt industry. Its employees utilize the east end of the former Blumenthal building, but that left about two-thirds of the building available for another company. They let Prairie Industries, which was looking to expand, know that there was space available in Lansing. The pieces of the puzzle came together, and now the two companies are neighbors.

ABOUT PRAIRIE INDUSTRIES

Prairie Industries specializes in contract converting and packaging of liquid, retail and product displays. They manage the complete co-manufacturing process including raw material procurement, production and final shipment to customers. Prairie Industries also has three locations in Wisconsin in addition to its new facility in Lansing.

Prairie Industries assembles more than 50,000 displays each year and its customers include Boveda and 3M Worldwide - specifically Scotch-

Brite, Scotchgard, Command, PELTOR, TEKK Protection, Pro Grade and Sandblaster sanding sponge, among others. Their contract packaging includes blister packaging, clamshell packaging, sleeve and shrink wrapping, and bagging. The company currently produces 40 million blister packs per year. The Lansing facility will work primarily with blister packaging.

Tina Stoeffler, plant manager for Prairie Industries, supervises two plants in Prairie du Chien, Wis. and also supervises the plant in Lansing. She has worked for Prairie Industries since the company began in 1994 in Prairie du Chien. The company started with eight employees and currently employs 425. They ship to multiple customers across the United States, and the Lansing facility is a satellite location. In Lansing, they are currently blister packaging safety glasses, earplugs and similar types of pieces.

The process involved at the Lansing facility includes the product, such as safety glasses, being delivered to the factory, then there is a machine that creates a blister pack around the object. Next, employees pack the objects into boxes and then others "pack out" by putting into a master shipping box that gets shipped to the customer. The main customer for the Lansing facility is 3M, so the final product is shipped to 3M distribution centers.

In regard to the Lansing facility, Stoeffler stated, "We did not have to change much in terms of the building space. A couple of large docking doors had to be created in the west end because the people who purchased the building (Tumbleweed Welding) were using the existing docking doors. We just made some minor modifications in order to start. We currently have no office personnel in Lansing, so the office space is not being utilized. Primarily, the factory space is what the company is using. In this facility we have 40 employees and are



still looking for some workers. People can go to our website, www.pind.com, to check for employment opportunities.”

She continued, “Workers can be trained for the specific job. We look for basic skill sets of good hand/eye coordination; we need good team players. We had a couple of workers in the Prairie facility who transferred over here, but the rest have been new hires from about a 30-mile radius around Lansing. Some of the workers are former Blumenthal employees.

“After the people were hired, they were sent to Prairie du Chien to be trained at one of our plants there. The company plans to start with 40 employees here. We are somewhat restricted by the height of the building, but we’ll maximize the square footage of the building. We may move other product lines here.”

Many of the jobs at Prairie Industries include repetitive tasks, but the people rotate within their stations. Because the Lansing facility is a satellite facility, ultimately everyone will be trained for all the jobs from beginning to end so they can work in any given area on any given day. Work at the plant is from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Thursday. The Prairie du Chien plants work multiple shifts.

Stoeffler concluded, “Prairie Industries is

a great company. People have the benefits of working for a company with local ownership. Our owner is a great businessman in the community and is always willing to invest in the company by expanding, purchasing new equipment, and doing what is necessary to make the company grow. Moving to Lansing would be a perfect example of that. That small-town connection is a huge benefit. We’re excited to be in Lansing, and we know that Lansing is excited to have us. There’s been a lot of buzz. We’re positive we can come in and make a difference. And we can grow this facility as well.”

Jeff Panko, the owner and president of Prairie Industries, stated, “The decision to open a facility in Lansing has been validated by the high quality of individuals that have accepted positions with Prairie Industries. Production has ramped up quickly, and we are already adding additional staff. We are also considering moving additional production to Lansing if we continue to receive high quality applicants. We appreciate the warm welcome and support from the local community.”

LOCAL REACTION

The community leaders of Allamakee County and of Lansing are extremely pleased that the two new businesses have taken over the

building. Lansing Mayor Mike Brennan stated, “The City of Lansing is extremely fortunate to be able to get a company like Prairie Industries to come into our community and set up their operation. Not only are they a great company, but their business matches our workforce perfectly. When a group of us went and toured their Prairie du Chien facilities, we knew this was a great match. Lansing and the surrounding community had the exact workforce that Prairie Industries needed, and the jobs that they bring are exactly what Lansing needed.”

Main Street Lansing Executive Director Craig White said, “We are very pleased that both Tumbleweed Welding and Prairie Industries realized Lansing’s potential as a community that is willing and ready to grow and change with the times. Change is never easy, but I think we stepped up and met the challenge to supply Prairie Industries with the manpower and can-do attitude they were looking for in a new location for their expanding business. Tumbleweed Welding was the spark that brought Lansing to Prairie Industries’ attention and we are grateful to them.”

From the county perspective, Larry Schellhammer, Allamakee County Board of Supervisors chairperson, added, “Allamakee County is very fortunate to have Prairie Industries expanding their operations to Lansing. The credit for reaching out to Prairie Industries goes to the O’Neills (Tumbleweed Welding) for working to accommodate the physical plant needs of Prairie Industries. Expansions like this help to stabilize the county tax base and provide needed employment. Economic development of this type is very competitive as many small communities have seen a decrease in manufacturing and industry. Therefore, this project has the potential to result in a positive ripple effect for the city of Lansing and for Allamakee County.”

A MILLION THINGS FOR SALE

HORSFALL'S LANSING VARIETY CONTINUES TO AMAZE SHOPPERS



Kristina Lane of Clermont, Iowa, shops for gifts at Horsfall's Lansing Variety store. Horsfall's owner, Paul Horsfall, says shopping at his store is similar to a treasure hunt.

BY STEVE CAHALAN
For La Crosse Tribune

LANSING, Iowa — There's always plenty of seasonal activity at Horsfall's Lansing Variety and at Horsfall's Store, both in downtown Lansing.

But some things never change.

As always, both stores are packed with merchandise, especially the variety store at 300 Main St. that Paul Horsfall has operated since

1975. And Horsfall is still known for being able to quickly locate whatever item a customer might ask for.

Horsfall still suspects he has a million items in the century-old building that houses Horsfall's Lansing Variety, an old-fashioned variety store.

And he's still known for trying to find value for his customer. Horsfall estimates that 80 percent of his merchandise is close-out items purchased directly from manufacturers.

"We sell more gift items and more kids items" during the holiday shopping season, Horsfall said, such as magical bracelets that can be turned into a pet and then back into a bracelet, Christmas-themed coloring books and stocking hats with built-in lights.

The variety store still sells its greeting cards for 99 cents each, and most of its spices are priced at \$1 each. It also has a large variety of candy, cookbooks, napkins, puzzles, cookie cutters, cookware, drink glasses, embroidery thread and hot iron transfers for flour-sack towels.

"It's awesome to see what there is here," Eileen Merges of Dubuque, Iowa, said as she examined a display of cross-stitch quilt blocks in the variety store. "We make a trip here once a year."

"I can't think of having to shop anywhere else," said another customer, Terisa Steiber of Lansing. She likes being able to shop in her hometown, adding: "I've known Paul all of my life. He's a fantastic guy."

Paul Horsfall was raised in Decorah, Iowa, where his father, Paul Sr., managed Anthony's department store for more than 20 years. Horsfall was assistant manager at Anthony's before he bought Krieger's Variety Store in Lansing in 1975.

Horsfall's Variety Store has about 3,800 square feet of space, compared with about 5,000 square feet at the former Brown's Department Store

Paul Horsfall has owned and operated his Horsfall's Lansing Variety since 1975.



at 360 Main St., a business that Horsfall bought in 1981. He gradually converted the latter from a department store to a second variety store. Today, it goes by the name Horsfall's Store.

The merchandise at Horsfall's Store is somewhat different than that at Horsfall's Lansing Variety, and includes items such as T-shirts, sweatshirts, home decor, signs, wall hangings, wind chimes, sports memorabilia and seasonal products. "We just got in 1,500 braided rag rugs from India" at Horsfall's Store, Horsfall said.

Horsfall, who is 64 and has a dozen employees, has no plans to retire. "It's still fun," he explained.

Horsfall still works seven days a week, but now does some of that work from his home in nearby Waukon. His wife, Dorothea Horsfall, was his business partner and helped him run both stores until she died in 2018.

Horsfall's Lansing Variety

WHAT:

An old-fashioned variety store at 300 Main St. in downtown Lansing, Iowa.

WHO:

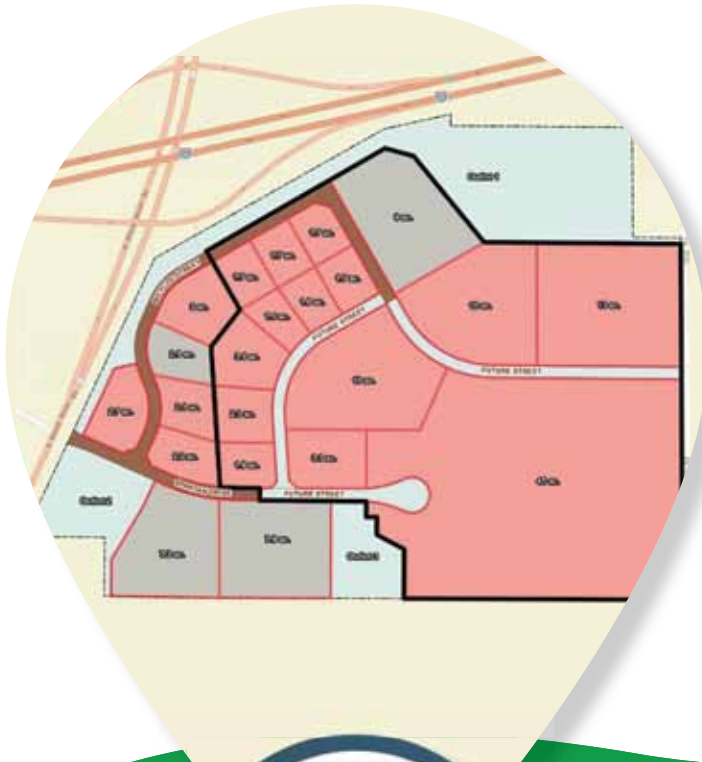
The store has been owned and operated since 1975 by Paul Horsfall, who also has operated Horsfall's Store at 360 Main St. since 1981.

HOURS:

Hours at both stores are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and noon to 4 p.m. Sunday.

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TIM PENNY:

Why I love living in southern Minnesota

BY TIM PENNY
Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation

Anyone who knows me, knows that I love living in southern Minnesota and that there are many reasons why I choose to stay here.

As the president of Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, I can't imagine a better way to serve this region which has always been my home.

In 1862, my great-great grandfather homesteaded in rural Freeborn County northwest of Albert Lea on the shore of Penny Lake. Our family lived and farmed in that same area for the next three generations. My generation and my children's generation are the fifth and sixth to call rural southern Minnesota home.

As a young man I aspired to serve this region and was fortunate to do so for six years in the state senate and 12 years in Washington.

Upon leaving Congress I was determined to make a future for myself and my family in rural Minnesota close to my home roots.

The presidency at SMIF culminates my commitment to and passion for southern Minnesota, and I am so fortunate that the 20-county region served by SMIF is much the same as the region I served while in Congress.

As I travel throughout the area I have the pleasure of visiting with many partners and hearing their hopes and dreams for their communities.

People live here because of family, work, good schools, open spaces and beautiful landscape. They stay here because there is a common vision for a future that embraces change, diversity and innovation.

This commitment to a bright future for our children, business owners, small towns and new immigrants directly connects to the work that we do at SMIF in Early Childhood, Economic Development and Community Vitality.

During the past 32 years, SMIF has listened to the needs of this region and aligned our resources with those needs, investing more than \$111 million back into southern Minnesota.

In each county there are loan clients, grant recipients or program participants that we have had the honor of supporting throughout the years.

There are so many reasons why people love living here, and at SMIF we are infusing that theme into the work we do over the next few years as we embark on a \$3.5 million "Love Where You Live" endowment campaign to strengthen our region's future.

We believe this theme gets at the root of everything we do at SMIF. This campaign will allow us to support more entrepreneurs, prepare more children for their future, and increase financial investments in our communities, putting SMIF in a position to continue making this region a place people want to call home.

I can't believe how lucky I am to have served this region for so much of my life. I love where I live because of the people. You are what makes southern Minnesota special.

You can find more about our new campaign at smifoundation.org/lovewhereyoulive.

As always, I welcome your comments and questions. You can reach me at timp@smifoundation.org or 507-455-3215.

Learning from Bob Kierlin

ENTREPRENEURS GATHER TO HEAR FASTENAL FOUNDER SHARE STORY

BY TESLA MITCHELL
Winona Daily News

Standing in front of a room full of 100 entrepreneurs, community leaders, city officials and students at the Garage Co-Work Space in Winona, Fastenal founder Bob Kierlin spoke about his career as an entrepreneur and what others can take from his experience in their own business ventures.

It was part of an event called Fireside Chats, hosted by the Garage Co-Work Space, and was just one of the many events the organization

has planned to bring entrepreneurs closer to resources and support.

Although the room was packed with Winonans rubbing shoulders and leaning against the wall, it was mostly silent, save for Kierlin in his blue blazer talking through a microphone while standing next to a TV broadcasting the view of a roaring fire. The well-known, successful businessman shared what he believed were some key points of why Fastenal grew from a small storefront on Lafayette Street to a company with more than 2,600 branches worldwide.

“Believing in people is really the success of Fastenal,” Kierlin said. “You have to believe in the potential of people.”

Kierlin said it’s one of the two absolute requirements for a successful organization. The first? Leaders and everyone in the organization need to pursue a common shared goal. The second? Leaders must find a way to foster, encourage and use the potential of every person who joins the organization.

Those are two simple requirements, he said, but far from easy.

“As a society, we don’t have a way to measure potential,” Kierlin said.

And it’s certainly easy for an organization to loosen its grip on having everyone pursuing the same goal.

Some things that help from his experience, he said, are stepping away from management and instead using leadership, rewarding innovation with a pat on the back and maybe a financial reward program, and not putting as much emphasis on job descriptions — which he said

can set limits that box people in.

Most importantly, make sure the business is adaptable, he said.

“Things are always changing, and you have to work that into your business,” he said to the attentive crowd. “If there’s a better way to do it, we’ll adapt to it.”

Winona State University business student Zane Mattiuz said a lot of what Kierlin said is what he’s been learning at WSU, but it definitely drives it home to hear it from him.

“It’s kind of cool to hear it from a successful CEO ... rather than our teacher,” he said.

City of Winona’s director of community development Lucy McMartin said it’s a great opportunity for the community to hear from Kierlin.

“To be able to have advice from one of the top past CEOs is real valuable,” she said.

As the room began to empty and a handful of people were left mingling, co-work space director Samantha Strand took a huge sigh of relief as she said the event went amazingly well.

Strand said although every person in the room may have not described themselves as an entrepreneur, they absolutely are, because just the act of being innovative and thoughtful in their career makes a person an entrepreneur — or intrapreneur. The plan for the future is to continue events that help people see themselves as such and grow within their career.

“Every person in this room can think of their career in a different way,” Strand said.



Fastenal founder Bob Kierlin talks at The Garage Co-Work Space in downtown Winona as part of The Garage’s “Fireside Chats with Founders” program.

“Believing in people is really the success of Fastenal. You have to believe in the potential of people.”

– Bob Kierlin

Local residents and entrepreneurs pack inside The Garage Co-Work Space in downtown Winona as Fastenal founder Bob Kierlin speaks, as part of The Garage’s “Fireside Chats with Founders” program.



NEW SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE PROGRAM AIMS TO GIVE

'DIRT'

MADELINE HEIM
Winona Daily News

When Liz Micheel, professor of biology at Minnesota State College Southeast, presented her proposal for a brand-new degree program to administrators, she thought there would be at least a little resistance.

“I had an argument for every reason why we needed to do sustainable agriculture here,” she said, including her personal motivations for handing students the skills to farm with the environment in mind as well as the unique topography that makes the Winona area ripe for this type of work.

But as it turned out, she didn't need any of her arguments. The proposal was OK'd almost immediately.

“I think it just makes sense,” said Micheel, who owns a hobby farm and has watched her neighbors farm conventionally for years.

The large machinery the farmers in western parts of Minnesota use regularly doesn't work as well in the Driftless region, she explained. And beyond that, her biology background allows her to see common practices in agriculture that might not be producing the effects that are wanted.

“It's a horrible idea to put 20,000 turkeys in a building together,” she gave as an example. “Biologically, they're all going to get sick and you've set it up perfectly for disease. There's got to be a better way.”

The program is poised to launch in fall 2019, but students who are interested have the option

to take an introduction to agroecology course taught by Winona State University professor Bruno Borsari this spring. It's built largely around classes that already exist, including some in the business field and a roundup of farm machinery skills, but a handful of agriculture core courses — like soil science, crop science and farm safety — will be new.

The agriculture courses will focus on the “triple bottom line” of economical, social and environmental factors that make up a successful farm, while the machinery skills classes will give students hands-on skills. They'll have the opportunity to earn their diesel maintenance certification, as well as a Class B commercial driver's license.

“I want these guys to come out of here ...



AT MINNESOTA STATE COLLEGE SOUTHEAST STUDENTS

CRE'D'

with the goal that they can take a piece of dirt, manage it and make an actual farm out of it that's economically and environmentally sustainable," Micheel said. "I want these students to come out with dirt cred."

The focus on dirt cred, of course, means students will need some time with the dirt. Micheel said both Southeast's Winona and Red Wing sites have the space to plant directly on campus ground, but she's also reaching out to local farmers who might offer up their farms for the students to get some experience.

One of those farmers is Erik Harris, president of the Driftless chapter of Minnesota's Sustainable Farming Association.

Though Harris said he'd welcome students to his farm, where he grows organically, the

primary goal of involving the SFA is to make those connections with local farmers, like the Winona Farm, and to promote the methods that go along with farming sustainably.

"It's not necessarily the organics, it's the people that have shown capabilities in creative ways of doing things that we'd want to pursue and provide that education to the students," he said.

Like Micheel's dirt cred, the SFA provides beginning farmer classes to teach hands-on skills like sheep shearing, fence building and greasing tillage equipment, Harris said.

Although the program hasn't received its official green light yet, it's on track to begin next year. Micheel presented her proposal to the college's Academic Affairs and Standards

Committee last Thursday and said that, overall, it's garnered lots of support. She's aiming for final approval in November.

As for why it's an important program to offer students at MSC Southeast, Harris pointed to the focus of many land-grant and large research universities on "feeding the plant" — maximizing crop yield, reducing risks and exploring GMO usage. A degree in sustainable agriculture can reignite the responsibility of the farmer to be a steward of the land and be cautious with how their practices affect the earth and the world around them, he said.

"When we're considering our impact as farmers on our community, our water, our soil, then it's something of value," Harris said. "I'm just really honored to be a part of it."



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MAY 23: Workforce Summit
SEPT. 19: Internships and Apprenticeships
OCT. 17: Rising Stars Under 40
NOV. 1: Recruitment and Retention
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